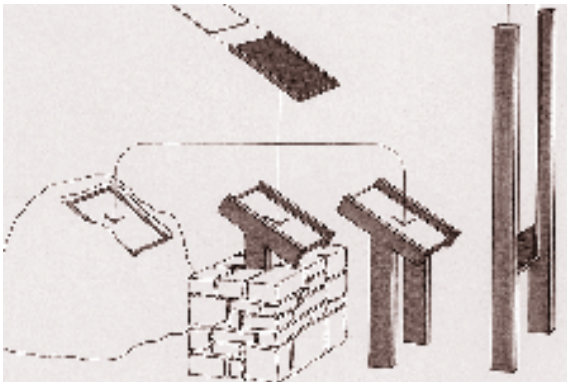
Cherry Payne

Pearls on a String
Interpreting Historic Trails



NPS guide on trail waysides illustrates various types of recommended bases.

The art of interpretation for parks and trails links people and places, tells stories, inspires, and ideally provokes passions. When interpretation is successful, visitors walk away with a new understanding—a new appreciation—of the meaning of the place they are visiting. They not only want to know what happened there, but what it means and why it is important. In addition, good interpretation develops constituencies—people who will speak out, telling others to visit these special places and advocating for their protection and preservation.

The interpretive process may contain many elements, such as information, orientation, education, entertainment, and even recreation. Each of these elements is important; but none is significant if it does not instill at least an intellectual desire to preserve the object being interpreted.

The interpretation of trails is no different than the challenge of interpreting at a specific park site; however, there are some unique aspects to national historic trails. While trails and historic roads are linear routes, sometimes extending over thousands of miles, national historic trails, as created by Congress, consist of individual sites located along the historic route. Think of a string of pearls—the string represents the route of the historic corridor, while the pearls represent the sites along the route where resources are preserved and the story of the trail is told. But trails inherently present obstacles of time and space to visitors. Unlike a string of pearls, the sites are not always adjacent to one another; oftentimes there are many miles between sites, or their historic relationships may be obscured by modern developments such as cities, subdivisions, and road realignments.

Similarly, it can be difficult to communicate the "big picture" with trails. Visiting trail sites can be reminiscent of the blind man describing the elephant: perceptions are created where one happens to encounter the trail, which may reveal only part of the story.

Some of the unique challenges to trail interpretation include issues such as historic context of the site, isolation of resources from other sites, visitor expectations, and site amenities—or lack thereof.

When visitors go to a park site, they often (but not necessarily) have expectations of what they will see and experience. These expectations may come from park literature, television or news stories, friends who have visited the site, or other sources. And, as simplistic as it may sound, visitors usually know when they get there. They pass a sign or pay an entrance fee which puts them on notice that they have arrived at their destination. From that point, their expectations begin to be reinforced or reshaped. Interpretive activities, be they personal or non-personal kinds of programs, then have a springboard from which to be launched.

Typically, trails do not have entrance stations, visitor centers, or even signs notifying visitors that they are "entering" a particular trail. It is not uncommon for visitors to trail sites to be "accidental tourists," stumbling upon a site, and only realizing its significance through interpretive exhibits. Their discovery may be a gem of delight in a trip that may have other purposes. They then strive to place the site into some sort of meaningful context, which means that almost every trail site, no matter how minimal the interpretation, must have basic information to orient visitors to the big picture.

On national historic trails, many times the sole interpretive element at a site is an outdoor exhibit providing information on a particular element or site—commonly called wayside exhibits by the National Park Service. Some trails have opted to develop standard orientation panels to provide the needed contextual information, while others include the information on a single wayside, along with site-specific information. There is no single formula, since each site, and each site manager's needs, are unique.

This issue is closely related to the issue of historical context. On the Santa Fe National Historic Trail, visitors can encounter historic sites and interpretive materials at a city park in Prairie Village, Kansas (a suburb of Kansas City), at a privately-owned ranch in New Mexico, 10 miles off a U.S. highway, or at federal sites administered by the USDA Forest Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, or the National Park Service.

If visitors are among the growing number of trail buffs who constitute an ever-expanding constituency group, their intent may be to explore a particular trail, to visit as many sites as they can,

and to learn its every nook and cranny. Their interest in a particular trail may be a serious avocation. For these folks, the trail, and its isolated sites, constitute an experience that harkens back to the original trail experience. On the Santa Fe Trail, traders spent eight weeks crossing the plains between New Mexico and Missouri, with stops at particular sites that were days apart. Serious trail visitors will relish the fact that it may take hours to move from one site to the next; with these visitors, the process evokes the story of the trail.

Yet, for others, the stop may be merely to break the tedium of a long trip made for purposes other than trail exploration. The challenge, which is not unique to trails, is to transform these people's momentary interest into captivation.

Every interpreter, every park, every historic site, addresses visitors' preconceived notions about what they will find at a site. For historic trails, one common misconception is that there is a recreational trail from one end of the historic corridor to the other. While there may be segments that are appropriate for recreational uses, it is impossible to travel the route as it was during its heyday. Modern intrusions such as highways, cultivated fields, private property, and other alterations make it almost impossible. But, this obstacle offers opportunity, in that all the historic trails have auto tour routes which roughly parallel the historic trail route. This provides a means for the modern traveler to explore the essence of a trail as they follow part of or all of the historic route. From an interpretive perspective, it may be easier to make those connections with people who themselves are involved in the same activity—travel—as those who made the historic trail significant in the first place.

Many trail sites are rural and isolated; in some cases, private landowners certify historic sites that they own and allow the public to them. Amenities—such as restrooms, water, picnic facilities, information stations—that the public may expect at more traditional sites often will be missing here. It is important, then, to communicate the relative isolation, potential hazards, weather concerns, road conditions, and other kinds of information that visitors need to know prior to visiting a particular site. But, because a trail can be over 1,000 miles long, and it is financially, if not practically impossible to place visitor centers and information stations every 50 miles or so, it can be difficult to communicate this kind of information to people planning a visit.

Most trails use similar strategies that any site would use to address these various issues. But, rather than focus activities at a visitor center or information station, trails must use media that can reach out to its constituents. In other words, we go to visitors, rather than visitors coming to us. Brochures offering information on the overall significance of the trail, the route of the auto tour route, and where to go for site specific information, forms the cornerstone of this effort. Orientation videos, slide programs, and traveling exhibits round out the effort.

Interpretation that is effective, that makes places come alive, is usually brief. It gets to the core ideas—what is really significant and compelling about a place. Trail interpreters should avoid the tendency to over-interpret. Too many exhibits, too many signs, too many non-historic elements placed at a site can detract from the visitors' experiences by overwhelming them with information, and not allowing them to experience the place. Interpretation should be just enough to stimulate the imagination of visitors. Good interpretation leaves visitors wanting to learn more, wanting to visit more trail sites, wanting to return again.

On the Santa Fe and Trail of Tears National Historic Trails, as well as most other national historic trails, auto tour routes have been defined which roughly parallel the historic trail. Agreements are then developed with the various state departments of transportation through which the trail passes to erect signs with each trail's distinctive logo along the highways. These signs serve to publicize the existence of the trail, as well as to confirm the route to those traveling along the trail.

As with any interpretive effort, the best and most effective interpretation is offered by people who want to share their passion for a resource. The trails program offers a unique, grassroots approach to protection and interpretation with the certification of sites (remember the pearls?). Private landowners, historical societies, businesses, and state and local agencies may certify their qualifying historic resource with the National Park Service. The resource then becomes a part of the national historic trail. Yet, how interpretation is accomplished at each site varies, depending upon the issues associated with access to and protection of the resource. Sometimes formal tours are offered; other times visitors must make arrangements to visit in advance; many times, a private landowner will informally greet visitors. But at each of these places, there is a person or people who love that resource and have worked hard to preserve and protect it. And when visitors have a chance to connect with those people, who not only are stewards of their lands, but are willing to share their knowledge and excitement with the public, some of the best interpretation happens.

Cherry Payne was the Interpretive Specialist for the NPS Long-Distance Trails Group Office in Santa Fe, New Mexico, before moving to San Antonio Missions NHS, Texas.